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CHINA: FIRST THOUGHTS ON THE STATE MILITARY COMMISSION [REDACTED] 25X1

Summary

We believe Deng Xiaoping intends the new Central Military Commission, formally inaugurated at the National People's Congress last week, to assume the principal role in day-to-day military administration and operations. A compact, predominantly reform-oriented leadership group, the Commission in our view marks a step toward a rationalized, more efficient higher command structure. We believe the new commission is also part of an effort to circumvent conservative opposition to Deng's military reforms from the party military commission, promote the image of a newly professionalized military, and impose an institutional barrier against the possibility of Cultural Revolution-type abuses of military authority. [REDACTED]

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Constitutional Mandate

The Central Military Commission (zhongyang junshi weiyuanhui) was established by Article 93 of the national constitution adopted last December. In the briefest of seven sections on the state structure, the document states that "the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China directs the armed forces of the country." Significantly, the constitution clearly subordinates the Commission to the National People's Congress, not to the party. Also, the council of ministers, headed by the premier, is given an as yet undefined degree of control over "the building of national defense." This almost certainly involves budgetary matters, as a Chinese

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economic official recently affirmed to a foreign visitor, as well as principal responsibility for China's military industries and research establishment. []

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As had been expected, Deng Xiaoping was named to head the new Commission, whose membership overlaps with its party counterpart, similarly called the Military Commission (junshi weiyuanhui). In fact, the state commission incorporates the core leadership of the party body. Besides Chairman Deng, who heads both, each commission includes as vice chairmen the three most prominent representatives of the old guard--marshals Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqiang, and Nie Rongzhen--all of whom are increasingly incapacitated by age and infirmity. China's closest approximation to a joint chiefs of staff also sit on the new commission: the Secretary General of the party commission, the Chief of the General Staff, the Directors of the General Political and General Logistic Departments, and the Minister of National Defense. []

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Dressed for Action?

Although the state commission has been invested with the same prestigious personnel as the party body, it differs in an important aspect. It appears to be outfitted for action; the nine officials named at the Congress seem to comprise the commission's entire membership, and, by virtue of their other posts, these men daily preside over China's most important military business. []

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In contrast, the full membership of the party commission almost certainly includes the commanders of China's 11 military regions, their senior political commissars, and the chiefs of the PLA's main service arms as well as other senior military figures with no formal command responsibilities--a body so geographically dispersed that it could not easily meet routinely. Perhaps more important, the party commission seems to us a far more

*Yang Shangkun, Yang Dezhi, Yu Qiuli, Hong Xuezhi, and Zhang Aiping, respectively. []

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**The new commission is therefore markedly unlike its putative predecessor, the National Defense Council, a sprawling honorary board that existed before the Cultural Revolution. []

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conservative body that almost certainly includes several of the senior officers who have resisted many of Deng's military reforms. *** [redacted]

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The active nucleus of the state commission--Yang Shangkun, the general department chiefs, and the defense minister--are vigorous supporters of Deng's effort to modernize the army and regulate its political influence. We believe that Deng will task the state military commission with implementing his military reforms. The fact that its members are all based in Beijing and have responsibility for much of the routine administration of military affairs may enable Deng to circumvent political obstructions from within the larger party organization. Deng employed a similar strategy in 1980 when he reestablished the party Secretariat to shift the day-to-day control over party affairs away from the aging and more conservative Politburo to a smaller, more dynamic, and sympathetic body. [redacted]

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Other Purposes

The principle of party leadership will of course be maintained under any institutional arrangement; the system of political commissars and unit party committees will continue to function. We believe, however, that shifting routine command responsibilities to a state organization marks an advance toward several interrelated objectives. [redacted]

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Aside from overcoming interference from members of the larger party commission, the creation of a state organ institutionalizes a new command relationship, which, according to the Chinese media, "is unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic;" it places the military within the state structure. This can be seen as part of a larger program of Deng and his allies: to distinguish clearly between party (policymaking) and state (executive) organizations, with both functioning more efficiently in the process. In practical terms, Deng seeks to allow professionals--including military men--the run of their technical domains, benefiting the immediate unit as well as the state, and thus reducing the interference of party hacks who under Mao had broad authority but slight professional competence. [redacted]

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*** We presume that most ex officio members of the party Commission--regional commanders, service arm chiefs, and the like--share Deng's reform ideas, but since the 12th Party Congress the Chinese have announced no Commission members aside from the nine named above. Consequently, we cannot precisely define the composition of Deng's opposition on the party Commission. Media commentary, State Department reporting, [redacted] consistently support the probability of high level opposition within the military. [redacted]

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We believe Deng probably perceives a special urgency in the case of the military. During the Cultural Revolution, the direct command relationship of the party to the army allowed a small group within the party--principally Chairman Mao and Defense Minister Lin Biao--to advance their own political ends using the military's coercive force. We believe Deng sees formal subordination of the military to the government as creating an institutional barrier that diminishes the possibility of this happening again []

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Creation of a state commission also reinforces other actions Beijing has taken to neutralize the military factor in Chinese politics, such as reducing the quota of party members in the army, shrinking its representation on national level political bodies, and replacing officers and men cast in the orthodox Maoist mold with newly indoctrinated recruits of greater educational achievement and technical competence. Beijing also seeks to create a different perception of the PLA, both within the army and among the Chinese populace. Rather than thinking of the PLA as the party's army, propaganda encourages soldiers and citizens to regard it as a national army or a people's army. []

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What to Watch

We expect that policies affecting the military increasingly will be promulgated in the name of the state commission, that the commission will be a tool of military reform, and that the party body will assume a lower profile. The party's military commission, however, will remain the highest authority on broad policy guidelines, much as the Politburo is formally superior to the party Secretariat. The creation of a military leadership body under the state was controversial and, we believe, may not be fully acceptable to members of the old guard. We expect that, for a time, Deng will have to referee the jurisdictional contest between the two commissions. []

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A key indicator of the state commission's strength in the battle will be its staffing arrangements. For the state commission to have teeth, it must also have a staff, and that staff presumably must be drawn from the party commission bureaucracy if a transfer of functions is to work. We will look for signs that the top staff departments are being integrated into the state structure. []

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The role China's political commissars play will also be an indicator of progress. We expect to see changes under the new arrangements. The wording on the General Political Department in the party constitution is vague but basically confines the department to political work. To date, unit political commissars have functioned as co-commanders who countersign all orders. Under a professionalized military, the need for quick decisions and an unambiguous chain of command assumes priority over political concerns. Although the head of the Department will sit on the state commission and the system of political commissars

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will usefully continue to serve Beijing's interests, we believe it likely that the reach of unit commissars will gradually be restricted to largely political matters, such as morale, indoctrination, and education. [REDACTED]

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Finally, Deng Xiaoping eventually will have to surrender his leadership of both party and state military commissions. In our view, he is the only leader currently assured of the broad political acceptability needed to make a new arrangement work and consequently felt compelled to assume both chairmanships. His voluntary withdrawal in favor of a political ally will suggest that plans are successfully unfolding. [REDACTED]

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Deng's eventual resignation bears implications for the party General Secretary, Hu Yaobang. Hu's political base within the military is shallow, and he cannot expect to command the political support enjoyed by Deng. In our opinion the activation of the state military commission does not ostensibly enhance Hu's immediate position. His best prospects for support within the Chinese military remain among the rising generation of commanders who presumably stand to gain from reforms he has espoused in unison with Deng. As the shifting of daily operational command should redound to the advantage of young military professionals, Hu by virtue of his strong identification with reform may eventually benefit. [REDACTED]

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